

➤ **FIRST LOOK!**

CONAN

THE

WORDS OWEN WILLIAMS

YEAH, WE'RE IN TROUBLE ALL RIGHT!" THE FACT THAT MARCUS NISPEL, DIRECTOR OF LIONSGATE STUDIOS' NEW CONAN MOVIE, IS LAUGHING

provides the first hint that he speaks here not of production problems or studio dissatisfaction. Everyone is extremely happy with the new *Conan The Barbarian*. He speaks, instead, of the mighty warrior's forthcoming confrontation with his greatest enemy. Forget Thulsa Doom; forget Thoth-Amon. Conan is going up against the Cult Of Fandom. "We're fucked!" jokes Nispel.

Yes, this is the year Conan The Barbarian finally gets his muscles back (and in 3D, too), with Nispel praying to Crom that Conan 2011 will do for the looming Cimmerian what *Casino Royale* did for James Bond in 2006. Jason Momoa, known where he's known at all as Ronon Dex from *Stargate: Atlantis*, is now swinging the sword and filling the loincloth of Robert E. Howard's most famous and enduring creation, and he



CONAN

REBOOTED

From Texas Chainsaws to Hyborian swords: hack-happy director Marcus Nispel resurrects Conan The Barbarian for the 21st century — in hard-edged 3D



A Conan cohort gets ready for his close-up.

faces formidable odds. Not just the horde of aficionados who have yet to see Howard's work faithfully translated to the screen, but also the general viewing public, for whom Conan is indelibly Arnold Schwarzenegger, and who'll be viewing Nispel's movie as just another unnecessary remake.

King of the thankless task, having previously directed un-looked-for reboots *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and *Friday The 13th*, Nispel is cheerfully undaunted by *Conan's* prospective reception and pleased with the way it's shaping up. "It's a diamond in the rough," he tells *Empire*. "It's a real experience." This is, he insists, not simply a do-over of John Milius's 1982 version, but a fresh attack, ostensibly returning to its '30s pulp source, and carving its way through production in Bulgaria after previous attempts by the likes of the Wachowski brothers and Robert Rodriguez crashed and burned.

When it comes to movies, Conan's sandalled feet have been treading water for almost three

decades. Books, comics, role-playing and video-games, Saturday morning cartoons and low-rent, live-action TV series have kept him alive in other media, but incredibly, he hasn't torn up a cinema screen since *Conan The Destroyer* in 1984. And even then, it was in decidedly watered-down and kid-friendly form.

The production team is determined this *Conan* will have appropriately hard edges, teeth sharp and strong enough to defeat all the hovering vultures awaiting his failure. It will, for example, embrace an R-rating in the States — "It allows for the kind of sexuality and violence you would expect in a barbaric world," says screenwriter Sean Hood. Confidence is high, with producer Avi Lerner particularly excited to report, "We've got something special. I know I'm selling the movie, but I'm my own worst critic," he assures us. "It wouldn't have mattered whether a lot of my films got made or not, but having seen this, with all the production values and the cast and the thousands of extras, I'm really very happy." >



BRIEFING

CONAN THE BARBARIAN 3D

Released: TBC

Budget: \$90 million (estimated)

Director: Marcus Nispel

Starring: Jason Momoa, Stephen Lang, Rachel Nichols, Rose McGowan, Ron Perlman

Story: Conan The Cimmerian (Momoa) kidnaps a mysterious girl named Tamara (Nichols) and uses her to draw out warlord Khalar Zym (Lang), the man who slaughtered his family and village.

Based on: Robert E. Howard's Conan stories, and John Milius's 1982 movie, starring Arnold Schwarzenegger.

Conan's raid on the Hyborian World Of Leather store was a resounding success.

"It's kind of bullshit to say it's not an FX movie," says Nispel, "because we've got four months of post-production and 1500 shots still to add, but you can watch the movie right now and not actually notice that the FX are missing. They're just the icing on the cake. I was very taken with *Apocalypse*; that's how I wanted to do it."

ALARGE PART OF WHAT'S MAKING EVERYONE SO HAPPY IS MOMOA. "IT WAS CLEAR WE WOULDN'T FIND OUR CONAN AT THE TYPICAL agencies," says Nispel. Some consideration was given to Jared Padalecki, who had worked for Nispel in *Friday The 13th*, but the director explains, "Conan has to be a king *and* a savage. Jared certainly had the physique and he could have been the king, but I couldn't see him as the barbarian." After a worldwide search going as far afield as Russia and Iraq ("John Milius said I should cast an Iraqi to terrify Americans!" laughs Nispel), the director was surprised to find his leading man in Hawaii, "surfing minutes away from me on a regular basis."

Momoa was on nobody's radar, but it soon became clear to the production that nobody else was going to come anywhere near as close to their stripped-down, streamlined Cimmerian as the 31-year-old Hawaiian. "He had this huge beard and he looked a bit like a Klingon commander," Nispel recalls. "I told him he'd have to lose the

beard because he looked like a pirate, and he said, 'If you give me the movie, I'll take the beard off. If you don't give me the movie, I'll play a pirate and make Conan look like the pussy that he is!' And that's the guy looking for the role of his life! He absolutely had the attitude. I rolled some film on him and he was amazing; he had the swordplay down and at the end he did the Maori haka, and it was just incredibly powerful! I played the tape to Lionsgate and they said, 'Well, we like him,

is not involved in the film, but is friendly with Nispel) was that the character should embody a sometimes reprehensible morality without the audience ever disassociating from him. "Conan needs to be the kind of guy that grabs a girl's ass, and she laughs and he most likely gets laid that night. Whereas if you and I did that, she'd slap us and sue us for the rest of our lives," as Nispel succinctly puts it. "That's what we were looking for, and I knew we'd found it in Jason. He made all

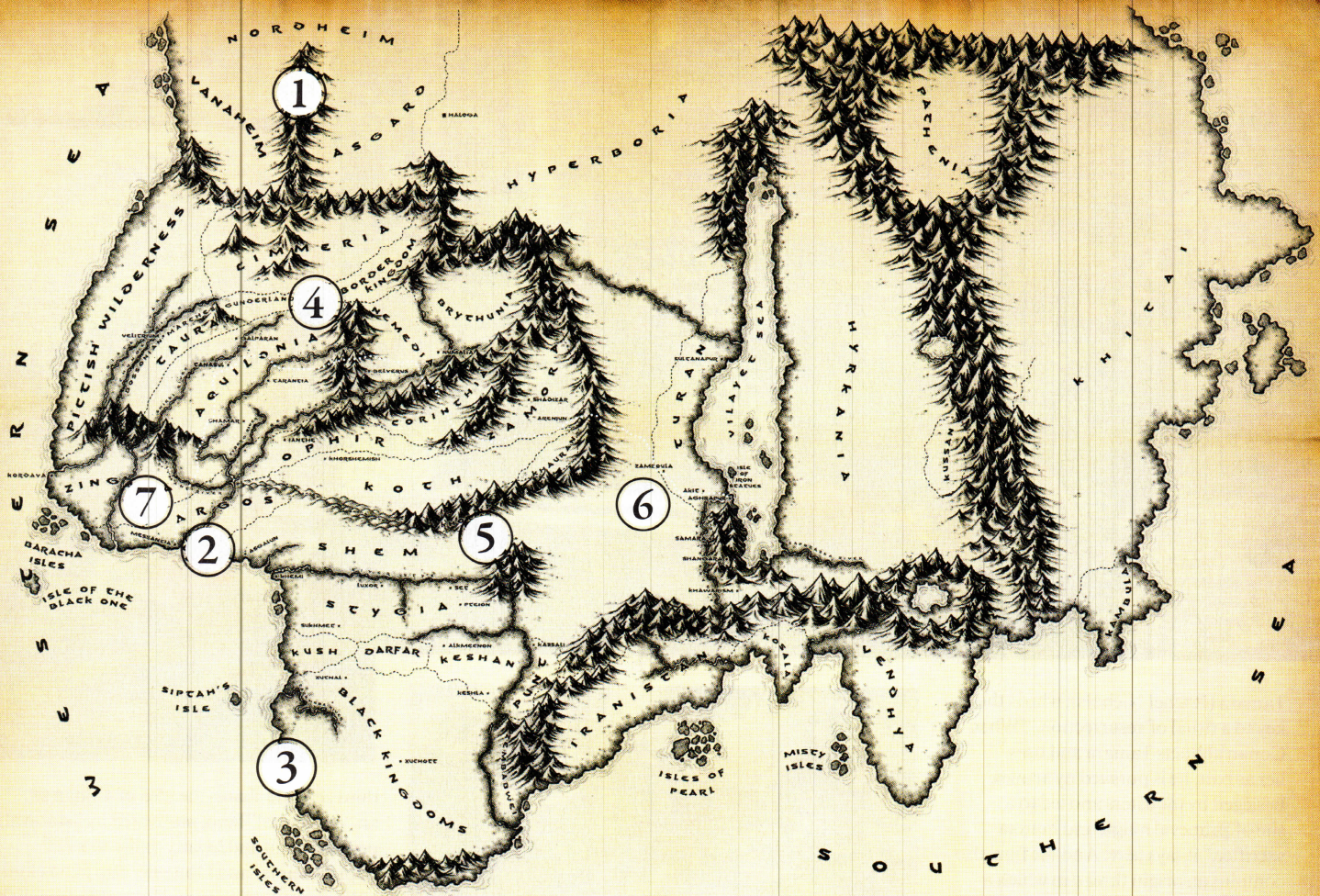
"Conan needs to be the kind of guy that grabs a girl's ass, and he likely gets laid that night." Marcus Nispel

but can he do it again? He's trying too hard to sound like Conan.' But that's how he sounds in real life: like he's talking through a bucket!"

Much thought and effort has gone into making Conan a "difficult" hero, with Nispel explaining that he was interested in the difference between characters whose violence the audience cheers, and those who make an audience feel slightly more equivocal. John Milius's second piece of advice after pointing Nispel Iraq-wards (Milius

the Lionsgate office girls swoon."

With the literary Conan's steel-spring muscles, keen wits and cat-like speed fully embodied, Momoa the barbarian safely distances the new film from its liberty-taking Schwarzenegger predecessors. The fact remains, though, that for all its back-to-the-books posturing, the new *Conan* is once again based on an original screenplay, involving evil warlord Khalar Zym (*Avatar*'s Stephen Lang), and the enigmatic >



A Rough Guide To Hyboria *Things to see and do in Conan's neck of the woods*

1. Lands Of The North The dense forests and gloomy plains of Cimmeria offer little in the way of excitement, but serve as an ideal base from which to venture north to Vanaheim and Asgard. The ice-capped Eiglophian Mountains offer spectacular opportunities for the winter sportsman, though constant impending slaughter by Frost Giants can be a worry.

2. Road Of Kings Experienced road-trippers will enjoy the Road Of Kings, which takes in Corinthia, Nemedia and Zamora. If you only opt for one of those destinations, head for Zamora, renowned for its haunted towers and dark-haired women, but keep a wary eye out for pig-sized spiders and elephant-headed aliens. Also, avoid the City Of Thieves, which is named that for good reason.

3. The Black Coast Sun-worshippers should head for the palm-lined shores along The Black Coast, although there are no tourist enclosures, and the threat of savage pirates who will sell you into slavery is ever-present. Heading inland to Kush, be sure to stop off in The Vale Of Lost Women: perfect for stag nights and those executive team-building exercises.

4. Aquilonia Less hardened travellers should opt for a stay in Aquilonia, the self-styled "proudest kingdom in the world", protected from outside attack by "buffer" provinces like Westermarck. Rafting is available along the Black, Thunder and Shirki rivers, although all three pale in comparison to the River Of Death Ice, much further to the north-east in Hyperborea.

5. Ancient Near East Ophir, Stygia and Koth offer much for the keen historian, although the former is the only one that remains a going concern: wealthy to the extent that its knights wear gilded armour. Koth is generally beset by civil war, but is the oldest of all Hyborian kingdoms, settled immediately after the oceans drank Atlantis. Stygia is mostly desert, although inexplicably it boasts more wizards per square league than anywhere else.

Recommended Eateries

6. House Of Aram Baksh, Zamboula Reasonably priced Ghazan wine sold by the tankard. Room and board available. Other residents may be demons.

7. The Inn Of The Nine Drawn Swords, Messantia Dancing girls

are occasionally spies; food may be poisoned.

Transport

On land: Foot; horse; camel. Camels are known to spit; please do not be tempted to retaliate by punching them in the face.

By sea: Passage can be bought on buccaneer vessels travelling to and from the Baracha Isles, at traveller's own risk.

Useful phrases

"Be sensible, wench; I'm not going to harm you" – proven seduction technique. Staring with burning interest can also be effective.
 "Back, if you value your dog lives!" – useful when confronted by the Watch.
 "The hell with you" – to be used when talking to Crom.

Here: Conan turns vicious killer in search of his missing chainmail sleeve. Below: Supine actor considers suing his agent.

Tamara (Rachel Nichols), who is the key to a ritual of resurrection. "When Conan abducts Tamara and uses her as bait, he is pursued by armies, besieged by monsters and led to a site of primeval magic and human sacrifice," it says here. And the film also contains an origin thread in which a young Conan sees his village put to the sword and vows revenge on the sorcerer responsible: plot beats entirely familiar from the *Milius* film, and not at all from Robert E. Howard.

Nispel is up-front about his love of the original film, although he isn't

"He's not just a muscle-man in a loincloth; there is a *gravitas*, a raw passion and intensity." Sean Hood

keen on sword-and-sorcery tropes that see simple strongmen defeating supposedly all-powerful wizards: "Why doesn't the wizard just turn Conan into a rabbit?" He says he makes movies for his 16-year-old self, who was tremendously excited when *Conan The Barbarian* finally arrived in his native West Germany. "I was a big *Star Wars* fan, and *Conan* came out soon after, and I remember I read an article in *Time* magazine that said, 'Milius' *Conan* is *Star Wars* by a psychopath. I was like, 'Man, if I ever make a movie, I want someone to say that about me!'"

Yet screenwriter Josh Oppenheimer (working in tandem with his regular professional partner, Thomas Dean Donnelly) is a little more defensive

about the decision to craft a new story rather than adapt an existing one from the Howard canon.

"We could have stretched out a single short story," he tells *Empire*, "but we opted to create a new one: one which spoke to the medium it was being created for. Our intention was to create something that fit snugly within the existing *Conan* mythology, which was hardly less of a challenge than making one of the original stories work within a traditional three-act structure."

During the shoot, on-set script doctor Sean Hood made some significant revisions ("simplifying and clarifying the mythology, making major contributions to characterisations," as well as entirely changing the

third act). He shares the idea of Conan as an "existential" hero, motivated by "survival, personal gain and loyalty to his allies". (Oppenheimer and Donnelly also liken Conan to a Western gunslinger, and brought some of those elements to the script in homage to Howard's favourite genre.) But Hood took issue with a late narrative shift in which "Conan seemed to embrace and trumpet a higher purpose. I didn't think that was true to his character. Some characters are compelling precisely because, despite enormous danger and pressure, they heroically refuse to change."

Both parties ultimately agree that translating Howard from the page to the screen is uniquely difficult. "I'm always struck by the way illustrations of H.P. Lovecraft's monsters look so childish and cheesy, while his stories are so nightmarish," says Hood. "Likewise, Robert E. Howard's writing isn't fairly represented by a muscle-man in a loincloth with a buxom babe. There is a *gravitas*, a raw passion and intensity that can get completely lost."

Nispel concurs, although he's by no means averse to muscles and boobs, and says there was almost no need to come up with concept artwork, since Frank Frazetta's famous oil paintings (used on the *Conan* paperback covers for years) had already done the job.

"Marcus sees things like nobody else," says Avi Lerner. All involved will be hoping, with a new franchise in the offing, a sequel already being written, and stablemate *Red Sonja* in the works, that the audience sees it Nispel's way.

> *Conan The Barbarian* 3D is out this year and will be reviewed in a future issue.

